

# THE MUSIC OF



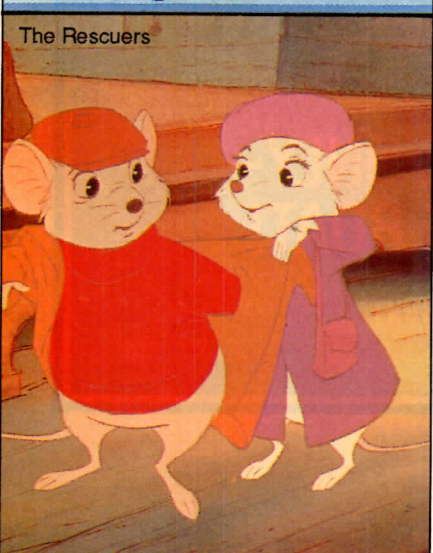
Lady And The Tramp



The Little Mermaid



Fantasia



The Rescuers

Long before Mickey Mouse first made his appearance in cinemas, a young animator by the name of Walt Disney had been busily setting up a small animation studio under the wings of the great Universal Studios in Hollywood.

Disney's calling card then was a rabbit called Oswald and the cartoons he created were a moderate success. But when he lost most of his animators and the rights to his rabbit, Disney decided to create a new character - a cute mouse named Mickey. Years later when looking back over the many achievements of his studio, Disney would often comment to employees "I hope we never lose sight of one fact ... that all this started with a Mouse."

When *Plane Crazy*, Mickey's first cartoon was introduced to an unsuspecting public in 1928, the response was favorable, and even ecstatic. Disney's only problem at that stage was that, although he had produced something wonderful, it was in no way unique. But as he was later to quote to *The Wall Street Journal* "Dream, diversify - and never miss an angle." Walt diversified ... and created the very first talking cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*. What made this exercise in animation so special was that it not only provided cartoon characters with voices, but they also perfectly synchronised with the action.

*Steamboat Willie* was also the first occasion Walt Disney put music to his characters. It opens with Mickey Mouse whistling *Steamboat Bill*, and later the famous mouse puts on an impromptu concert with a cargo of livestock providing the musical instruments.

From that auspicious beginning, Disney was to rely on music continually in all his productions. Although he was never personally involved in their composition, the stamp of Disney flavour was on all the songs. Today, with over thirty Academy Awards for musical score and individual songs to its credit, the Disney studio continues to diversify and "never miss an angle" in its production of both animated and live-action features - and especially in its choice of musical accompaniment.

The importance of music in Disney films becomes obvious when a list of some of those songs are glanced over. *When You Wish Upon A Star*, which has been recorded by many artists the world over, made its first

appearance in *Pinocchio* back in 1940. *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah* (*Song Of The South*), *Heigh-Ho* (*Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*), *A Spoonful Of Sugar* (*Mary Poppins*) and *Whistle While You Work* (*Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*) are all classic songs that would never have come into being had it not been for the colourful backdrop of Walt Disney's animated and feature films.

The development from Mickey Mouse's opening whistle in *Steamboat Willie* to the full scale orchestral productions of *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* took only eleven years. As the studio artists perfected the synchronised animated action and music, Disney challenged them to create more and more elaborate and intriguing storylines.

One of the fledgling studio's earlier success stories was the 1933 short feature, *Three Little Pigs*. Warner Bros cartoonist and Bugs Bunny animator Chuck Jones commented at the time of its release that *Three Little Pigs* "was the first time anybody ever brought characters to life in a cartoon. Before that, the villain was a big heavy guy and the hero was a little guy; everybody moved the same. But in *Three Little Pigs*, there were three characters who looked alike and acted differently; the way they moved is what made them what they were."

Part of the brilliant characterisation of the three little pigs themselves was the unforgettable theme song which became an institution - *Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Wolf?* Following *Three Little Pigs*, but still before *Snow White* was *The Band Concert* - another short feature produced in 1935. Mickey Mouse was back, this time as a band conductor, determined that his show was going to go on no matter what the distractions, in what was the first technicolour cartoon. The studio gave audiences a preview of its future animated epic - *Fantasia*, by taking Rossini's *William Tell Overture* and incorporating some particularly ingenious musical gags. A critic of the time, Joe Adamson, remarked that the entire cartoon could be taken as a joke on the self-absorption of musicians.

Disney's *Silly Symphony* series (of which *Three Little Pigs* was one) animated shorts developed into a kind of colourful, musical mayhem, but these minor forays into musical and animated combinations were leading up to one major challenge - a feature length animated picture based on Grimm's immortal fairy tale, *Snow White* (1934). It took



# Disney

three years to make, cost \$1.5 million and employed nearly 600 artists. At the time it was referred to by industry sources as "Disney's Folly", but Disney's gamble paid off and *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* opened to rave reviews and a box office tabulation of over \$8 million - the biggest take of any movie since D.W. Griffith's *The Birth Of A Nation*, released in 1915. When *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* was re-released to cinemas to celebrate its 50th anniversary, the classic cartoon went on to make another \$45 million in the US alone - a respectable total for a newly released feature, never mind one that was fifty years old.

Had Disney's gamble with *Snow White* failed, the history of animation and his studio would have been entirely different. The music of those magical films might never have been written and the characters created never drawn. But the gamble paid off with interest and led Disney towards what is seen as one of his greatest triumphs - *Fantasia*.

By far his most misunderstood work, *Fantasia* has been called both artistic travesty and grand adventure. It was designed to bring classical music to the public (or maybe an art audience to Disney) and it certainly achieved this. Music critics since have acknowledged *Fantasia* as a formidable influence - there are still some, however, who will never forgive him.

*Fantasia* began as a new short film, an animated interpretation of Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* with Mickey Mouse as the ill-fated apprentice. When he mentioned the idea to conductor Leopold Stokowski, the conductor not only agreed to be a part of the project but suggested other classical compositions that lent themselves to animated interpretation.

Popular classics were chosen, however Stokowski also chose to interpret compositions in the same way the Disney animators were doing visually. Such was the impact of the visuals with the music that Leonard Bernstein, during a 1973 Harvard lecture on Beethoven, commented "try not to think of those Disney nymphs and centaurs."

*Fantasia* was more than just an exercise in musical animation however, it also enabled Walt Disney to further extend the boundaries of animation itself. *Fantasia* created innovations in film structure and stereo sound - as well as a new method of fusing images with music.

In an age when glorious musicals were

the rage of Hollywood, it was only natural that Disney would produce animated versions of the same. After *Fantasia*, which enjoyed only moderate success at the box office, came *Pinocchio* and an Academy Award for *When You Wish Upon A Star*, closely followed one year later by *Bambi* and two Academics: one for *Baby Mine* and the second, in 1942, for *Love Is A Song*.

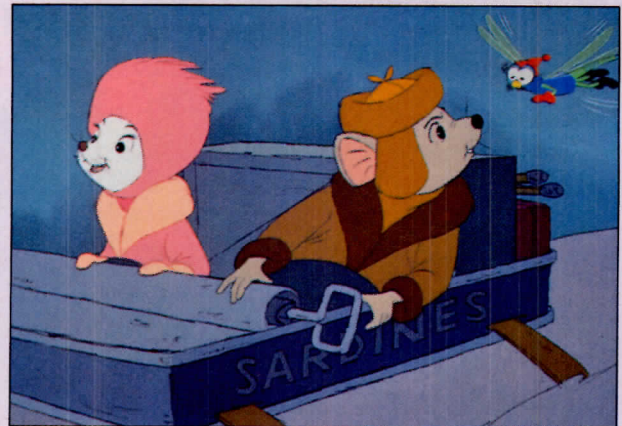
It wasn't only Disney's well loved classic animated features that won awards. In 1943, *Saludos Amigos* won Oscars for both score and song and in 1945 *The Three Caballeros* won Best Score and since then, the awards have been an ongoing phenomenon for the studio. Live action/animated combinations such as *Mary Poppins* won for both song (*Chim-Chim-Cher-ee*) and score not to mention Best Actress, Best Director, Best Picture, Cinematography, Art Direction, Film Editing, Sound, Costume, Social Visual Effects and Screenplay. *Bedknobs And Broomsticks* also won Oscars for score and song (*The Age Of Not Believing*). An older live action/animated

mix, *Song Of The South* was also awarded an Oscar for best song - *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah*, as was *Pete's Dragon* for *Candle On The Water*.

Though all types of Disney productions have won awards, it has always been and will always be the animated film that creates the most interest. After two decades of mainly live-action films, the Disney studio, in a return to its roots, has been a major player in the revival of the animated feature film. Disney has enjoyed box office success with *Oliver & Company*, an animated version of Charles Dickens classic *Oliver Twist*, the voices for this gem being provided by the popular musicians Bette Midler and Billy Joel. Disney's most recent success, and another Oscar winner for Best Song, was *The Little Mermaid*.

With new animated projects *Beauty And The Beast* and *Aladdin* in the works, the studio's tradition of quality animation coupled with memorable music looks set to continue well into the next century. Without it, our lives would be so much the poorer. Lyn Jones

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